'Aunt Betsy' and the quilting bees

By FRANCES PAULETTE

The diminutive lady in the blue gingham dress slowly descended the stairway of the big, rambling farmhouse and surveyed the disarray on the lower floor. The chairs, still grouped around the quilting frames as they had been left after yesterday's quilting party hid from view her sister who was busily working. Upon entering the room, Abigail saw her sister and couldn't believe her eyes. In utter dismay she watched as Jessica deftly pulled stitch after stitch from the beautifully patterned quilt. "Jessica!" she exclaimed in complete exasperation, "What on earth are you doing? Without even pausing to look up, her nimble fingers quickly pulling out stitch after stitch, she calmly answered her sister. "Now, Abigail, I was hoping to get this done before you got downstairs. I knew just how upset you would be if you found out what I was doing." Her sister still didn't understand...Jessica explained further.

"Abigail, I know you treasure every single stitch that our friends so lovelingly put in this quilt, just as much as I do. You know too, sister dear, you have never been quite as "persnickety" as I am about having everything done exactly right, no offense; and whether you like to admit it or not, your eyesight isn't quite what it used to be." As she continued to remove stitches she explained still further, "I knew good and well when you invited that Samantha, poor soul, that this would have to be done...she can't quilt worth a toot! I kind of thought of asking her to work with the kitchen crew, but that would have been worse...she can't cook either! Poor, dear Samantha!

Abigail? Jessica? Samantha? Purely fictional characters from my imagination. The situation? Very, very real! According to several ladies with whom I talked about quilting bees, it could have, and did happen on more than one occasion.

"The quilting bee, quite a social event in days gone by (and still is quite popular in some sections of the country) was a gathering of friends and relatives from all around the neighborhood. It didn't matter if you couldn't sew fine stitches...there was cooking to be done. It took quite a bit of good food to feed the members of the bee and their families. You see, the bee was often coupled with a barn-raising, woodchopping or some other task the men needed to complete, and hard work meant hearty appetities. The children usually came along if they weren't old enough for school or if school was not in session at that time. Occasionally there was a Samantha...one who couldn't sew or cook. So, in order to avoid hurt feelings she went ahead and quilted with the others and afterwards, when the guests had departed, the lady of the house would pull out the uneven stitches and redo the work to her complete satisfaction.

"Aunt Betsy", as Mrs. Marsh is affectionately known to many of her friends, is most certainly in my opinion, "Queen of Quilting" for Appomattox County. Quilting for all of her adult life, she has quilted 162 quilts since 1970; she quilted 26 in 1976. She told me that it takes about two days to do a simple quilt and longer for the more elaborate patterns. Then it requires two hours of tedious handwork to get the quilt hemmed. So, you can see that a lot of hard work and most of all patience is required to complete a beautiful quilt. It is no wonder that quilts are highly prized and handed down from generation to generation.

Mrs. Marsh might get a bit more quilting done if she weren't such a busy woman.

"Aunt Betsy" does all of her housework, all the gardening except for the plowing, is active in church, extension homemakers work, work with senior citizens, and she loves to visit. Though she lives alone, she is never lonely...she doesn't have time for that!

Mrs. Marsh told of an amusing incident that happened once at a quilting. One of the ladies was quilting with an "open-end thimble" and accidently dropped it on the floor underneath the quilting frame. A little boy was playing on the floor at his mother's feet. He picked up the thimble and swallowed it! Had it not been for the open end in the thimble allowing air to pass through the little tyke might not have survived.

It was not unusual for a mother to rap sharply on the head of her youngster as he got a bit rowdy while playing underneath the quilt...that thimble rap was a bit severe, too. Often a quilt is made from bits and pieces left over from clothing that had been made for the family. It might be that Mom's Sunday best dress, Aunt Bessie's petticoat, Father's best shirt and little sister's Christing dress might all be part of the family quilt.

In the old days a girl didn't think of getting married without several warm quilts; Mrs. Marsh had 6 quilts when she began her married life.

Quilts are more than something to keep us warm, and I'm sure, with the severe cold of last winter their popularity is increasing. A quilt is a work of love, a masterpiece of loving patience, something to be treasured.

While our English and Dutch ancestors brought quilt making to this country, the French women introduced appliqued ornaments in quilts in the form of leaves, flowers and vines in colors of satin and velvet. Quilts were often used not only as covering for the beds but also for draperies to keep out the cold.

With patterns many and varied, a potential quilter has much from which to choose. The Bible has provided many names for quilt patterns and designs, "Star of Bethelem", "Rob Peter to Pay Paul", "Jacob's Ladder" and "Crown of Thorns", and many others.

'Receet' for washing clothes

1. Bild a fire in the backyard to het a kettle of water. 2. Set tubs so smoke won't blow in your eyes if the wind is pert. 3. Shave one hole cake of lie soap in biling water. 4. Sort things - make three piles; 1 pile white, 1 pile of cullord, and 1 pile of werk britches and rages. 5. Stur flour in cold water until smooth then thin down with biling water. 6. Rub dirt spots on board, scrub hard, then bile, rub cullord but don't bile -- just rench and starch. 7. Take white things out of kettle with broomstick handle--rench and bleu and starch. 8. Spread tee towels on grass. 9. Hang old rags on the fence. 10. Pore rench water in the flowers beds. 11. Scrub porch with hot soapy water. 12. Turn tubs upside down. 13. Go put on a clean dress -- smooth hair with side combs, brew a cup of tee -- set and rest and rock a spell and most of all COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS!

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Home Demonstration Clubs at VPI. During the same year, Miss Rebecca Harvey and Mrs. Ann Cole were appointed co-chairmen to help compile the first scrapbook of club activities.

By 1961 there were 28 active members in the club.

In September of 1971, Mrs. Isabelle Coleman attended the 35th annual conference of the National Extension Homemakers Council in Dallas, Texas.

In the next year Mrs. Ruth Cole was appointed to attend the Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs at Blacksburg. Mrs. Winnie Martin attended the Conference on Aging, "Stepping Stones to Growing Older."

In November of 1975, Mrs. Coleman was elected Appomattox County Extension Homemakers chairman.

Mrs. Coleman also headed the making of the first Appomattox County flag.

Penny Mongold has been elected president of the club for 1980, Phylis Wilson has been elected vice president, and Elaine Stubblefield has been elected secretary-treasurer.

The club has been active in all projects and has given scholarships for 4-H members to attend camp at Holiday Lake.

Penny Mongold has been installed as vice president of District III for 1981-82.

Ladies! *Ladies!*

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